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SUBJECT: PROTESTANT SETBACK IN A NINH THUAN VILLAGE

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1. (SBU) Summary: A local evangelist from an ethnic minority village in central Ninh Thuan told us that all 30 followers affiliated with his Inter-Evangelistic Movement had renounced Protestantism under pressure. Local officials reportedly threatened to withhold government benefits and ostracize villagers who remained Protestant. The evangelist also was pressed forced to leave the village. The head of the Ninh Thuan provincial Committee for Religious Affairs said that the 30 villagers had "voluntarily abandoned" Protestantism as was a result of community pressure not because of government policy or action. In Hanoi, the national Committee for Religious Affairs informed Embassy that there are only three Protestants in the village in question. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On September 20, Pastor Ngo Hoai No, a leading pastor of the HCMC-based Inter-Evangelist Movement (IEM) contacted us to report allegations of forced renunciation among ethnic minority IEM followers in the central coastal province of Ninh Tuan. On September 22, we met in HCMC with Evangelist Ya Guong who said that over the past six months local police had stepped up harassment of IEM followers in Ja Rot village. According to Guong, the IEM established its presence in the village in 2000 when he moved in from Lam Dong Province. The members of the IEM house church were ethnic Raglai; some converted in 2003, others in 2005. The communal government leader is ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh). The senior local police official ethnic Raglai. Guong is ethnic Chu Ru, but his wife is Raglai. Guong said that, over the past six months, all 30 members of the house church have renounced their faith under pressure and because of fear of losing government benefits.

3. (SBU) According to Evangelist Guong, the community had been under episodic pressure since its founding in 2000. Recently, he has been called in repeatedly to attend working sessions by the district and commune police and was accused of being affiliated with activists in the Central Highlands working to establish a ethnic minority state. (He flatly denied this was the case.) He said that the 33 members of his church (including Guong and his family) were told that they must renounce their faith or risk losing all government assistance. On July 17, he said, the Commune People's Committee gathered all 33 IEM members, their families, and representatives from five other villages for a meeting. Guong said that he and his family were made to stand on a stage for four hours during which they were questioned and pressured to renounce their faith. Guong refused. On September 8, Guong and his family were called in for a "working session" with local police at which he was again threatened and told to renounce his faith. At that meeting, Guong said he presented the police with a copy of the February 2005 Prime Ministerial Decree on Protestantism. The police reportedly told Guong that the decree "does not apply here."

4. (SBU) Guong said that authorities had refused to vaccinate

his children or to issue his infant a birth certificate "until the issue of Guong's religion is resolved." Guong also said that he was given a letter to copy and sign which stated that he wished to leave the village "voluntarily" to pursue more favorable economic and religious opportunities elsewhere. Guong said that he did not want to leave his village. He had written a protest letter to the local Committee for Religious Affairs, but local officials refused to notarize or accept his letters.

15. (SBU) On September 23, we called the Chairman of the Ninh Thuan provincial CRA Nguyen Dinh Liem to discuss the allegations. He said that the GVN policy on religion was clear and the new legal framework on religion is being implemented in the province. That said, he agreed to travel to the remote village to investigate, which he apparently did on September 27. After that visit, he told us that there was no "forced" renunciation of faith, nor any refusal of government benefits or birth certificates.

16. (SBU) Liem acknowledged that 30 of the 33 followers in Guong's village had "abandoned" Protestantism; and that the villagers "had asked Guong to go and hold or attend praying services in a location where there is a church." He explained that the pressure came "in part" from other ethnic minority villagers, who feel strongly about maintaining their indigenous traditional beliefs. He committed to travel to the village again in early October to meet with Guong. He added that the province is preparing for various hitherto unregistered religious groups to register their activities. We were not able to speak with local officials directly.

17. (SBU) Embassy Hanoi also notified the national CRA of the incident. On September 29, the Embassy was notified that "villagers" were upset that Guong was "misrepresenting" the number of Protestants in the village -- while he maintained there were 33, in fact, there were only three: Guong and his two small children. Because of this misrepresentation, they asked him to leave.

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18. (SBU) Comment: Although members of the IEM have taken strong positions on some political issues, to our knowledge they have never participated in activities that could be seen to threaten Vietnam's territorial integrity. We also have received reports -- yet unverified -- that other IEM congregations in Binh Thuan and Binh Phuoc provinces also are coming under similar pressure. It is possible that authorities are concerned with the IEM because two of its HCMC-based leaders signed the "Block 8406" manifesto calling for multi-party democracy in Vietnam.

19. (SBU) Guong appears absolutely sincere in his claims. We pressed him hard and he gave detailed descriptions of events and did not appear to have a hidden agenda. Village-level differences between the newly converted and traditionalists frequently contribute to conflicts over religion and local officials may well be using public ostracism and threats of withholding benefits to discourage evangelical Protestantism. At least in this corner of Vietnam, the GVN decree on facilitating the practice of Protestantism appears tenuous. End Comment.
WINNICK